

# **The role of technological acceleration in the crisis of modernity: A view by Paul Virilio**

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## **Abstract**

*Technological progress is often referred as parallel with the fight against totalitarian regimes. This affirmation overlooks the problems that the modern world faces. Although developed countries have a high standard of life, underdeveloped areas of the world suffer violence, starvation and lack of social structure, condemning billions of people to poverty and no future.*

*If we want to review the relations between modernity, technology and totalitarian rule we should remember that for Freud, Nazism and Stalinism are not an unexpected guests of the Enlightenment, but a consequence of modernity, the moments when the essence of modernity is exposed in its purest form.*

*The French architect, town planner, and thinker Paul Virilio, has studied the lightning war (blitzkrieg) tactics of the 1930s, and shows how its essence has been moved to every area of modern life. Today no event is organized in the world of business, politics, art, marketing, etc. without a previous 'campaign launch' with the intention of maximizing the 'effect' of mobilization. With this in mind, this article will study how valid his thinking has been to the understanding of the all pervading presence of speed and speed technologies in modern life and their effects.*

## **1. The crisis of modernity**

The western thought usually reflects history as a linear process of improvement of social conditions. This idea must be opposed to the problems that the world is facing in the beginning of the new millennium. The Shakespearian phrase "the time is out of joint" seems to be truer than ever. Billions of human beings are deprived of drinking water, food, proper lodging and education. Vast areas of Africa and Asia live without a viable public administration cover in what has been called "failed states", struggling with war, traffic of human beings and every kind of misery.

On the other hand, in the so called first world, we have undeveloped areas in which civilization has not come up yet: violent slums where drugs are dealt are also excluded from the benefits of the welfare state. The question could be: When did the Enlightenment project fail? What brought violence and poverty when fraternity and prosperity were expected?

For Sigmund Freud, Nazism and Stalinism are not unexpected results in the process of enlightenment, but a consequence of modernity, the moment in which modernity's essence is exposed in its purest form. Jacques Lacan added that Nazism, Stalinism and ultra-liberalism share a common ideology about indefinite linear progress, in which everything that is beyond the scope of technology is considered raw material for the inevitable expansion of the technology [1].

The vision of Lacan on the arising of the consumer capitalism and the consumer society added new perspectives on the influence of the object of technology on the social bond. Jorge Alemán and Sergio Larriera are developing a related interpretation of the works of Heidegger and Lacan on the implications of the unconscious on the development of technology for thirty years now.

Alemán and Larriera explain that the drive bond is established between the subject and the consumer objects. These objects are being continuously substituted by advances of technology. This drive bond is an obstacle that makes the social bond itself difficult or impossible: "in this structure of emplacement, the objects of technology constitute a network of available gadgets that pass from intense bright to the opacity of garbage without any questioning about their mode of uncovering: This is the danger of the Technological Era that constitutes the central thesis of the heideggerian reflection on the topic." [2]

This never-ending increase of technological discoveries quickly cast aside with their never fulfilled promises has an enormous momentum that produces a blockade –a suture. And this suture impedes any

possibility of thinking about the incomplete nature intrinsic to social processes. According to the teachings of Lacan we must be aware that education, healing, and administration are, by nature, tasks that are impossible to reduce to an exact science. On the other hand, the continuous appearance of technological inventions tends to focus expectations for solutions to human problems more in the technical side rather than in the socio-political or organizational aspects.

Likewise, the relationship between the worker and the fruit of his work is altered. As Alemán indicate us: “Marx, in the formalization of his work, and throughout all his work, is pierced by the epiphany of an unwinding. This epiphany that indicates, in the presence of the capital, the existence of an unknown will of satisfaction, a co-belonging to calculus and drive, that allows us to conceive that renunciation of the drive satisfaction that every community needs, is transmuted here into a «*plus of joy*» for any of the workers. This *plus* is even reflected as a phantasmagoria, as a secret that is illuminated from the heart of the object. This *plus*, that was previously channeled by means of traditions, rites, folklore, feasts, nowadays, more and more, is being put in a way in which objects broke with each other while the men are unable to recognize the fruit of their work.” [3]

In this sense, Heidegger’s observations on the question of technology have special relevance. For him, in the relationship between men and technology, we are simple objects it requires. Our essence is not to be free and creative, but to work for technology. An example could be the way we are required to update our software continuously. The never-ending work of improving huge software programs full of superfluous capabilities is a new Sisyphus who is merely an object of this technological imperative; he is no longer a subject. He is an interchangeable piece in the greater structure that overwhelms and subordinates him. One of the reasons for our civilization’s discontent in is the awareness of lack of efficiency: the subject does not choose, he is just chosen.

## 2. Technology as a cult

While science, since the 20<sup>th</sup> century has had to confront the impossibility of perfect measures and the impossibility of knowing the complete state of a system (Heisenberg, Cantor, Gödel, Brillouin, Prigogine, Thom, etc.), we keep acting as if the techno-science were infallible. Technology is expanding more and more; and any area of human behavior is considered a possible area for the expansion of technology. While science is telling us that any approach to reality is approximate, technology

systems insist on developing themselves arrogantly. While science is telling us we are polluting the planet, the technocrats keep promoting more and more chemical solutions to our problems.

We can conclude that in modern techno-scientific systems, science is subordinate to and follows technology. As Virilio points out: “*First, I believe that these three revolutions and all that we were just saying lead to a technical "essentialism" [integrisme], a "cybercult". Just as there is religious "essentialism", there is a technical "essentialism" through technical fundamentalism, just as frightening as religious fundamentalism*” [4]. And, we can see that technology, speed and circulation of money and goods stand as the highest values of this modern ideology, we can even say a modern cult.

## 3. The assault techniques

At this point, Paul Virilio’s study of the lighting war (*blitzkrieg*) and the assault techniques that were well-established during the 1930s becomes very interesting. Modernity brings on the decline of the siege wars in which putting a cities under siege is an important part of the general strategy. Assault techniques are part of the cult of power and speed that were characteristics of the Nazi and fascist movements. In this cult of power, the dignity of humanity is forgotten on behalf of the ‘effectiveness’ of the struggle. This trend increased until it reached its peak in the horror in Auschwitz and the Holocaust.

It is interesting that, once the Second World War finished, the heritage of this ideology became stronger than ever in the ultra-liberal thought in Western democracies. Perhaps the political aspects of dictatorships are no longer fashionable. But the practicality that confers the maximum priority to results, and forgets about the means used to reach those results is more clearly displayed in the modern market-ideology. Today the area of politics is shrinking more and more and the markets remain as the only decision makers. This is a kind of totalitarian ideology.

And the essence of the assault war has been moved to every area of modern life. Today no event occurs in the world of business, politics, art, marketing, etc. without a previous ‘campaign launch’ whose purpose is maximizing the ‘*mobilizing effect*’. This intent to impress our customers or fellow citizens becomes what it has been called a “society of noise” –as opposed to an Information Society. This is a place where everybody tries to shut

louder than their competitors and leads to a current of over-information that is impossible to follow and prevents the citizen from finding reference points with which to understand the reality he has to live in.

During the First Gulf War journalists were entertained by the US Army and were flooded by such big quantities of information (apparently live) that they were unable to discern what was true from what was false. The main objective was to prevent journalists from taking a role similar to the one they had in the Vietnam War. As Virilio says: *"For the first time, as opposed to the Vietnam War, it was a war rendered live, worldwide - with, of course, the special effects, all the information processing organized by the Pentagon and the censorship by the major states. In fact, it is a war that took place in the artifice of television, much more than in the reality of the field of battle, in the sense that real time prevailed over real space"* [4]. Today, in general, the tactic of disinformation by using huge quantities of both true and false information is well established in every problematic situation (political, social, financial, etc.)

The modern myth emphasizes the idea that we are living in an Information Society, and that information is vital for development. Implicitly, the benefits of "quantities" of information are given priority when the key aspect of information is "quality". Fernando Saéz-Vacas adds: "An excess of information tends to annul the creation or regeneration of knowledge. [...] the Information Society, accelerated by the force of technology, could asymptotically become, cruel paradox, a noise society" [5]

Ecological warfare is part of the current violence, despite being banned by the Geneva Convention. For example the use of chemicals to deforest Vietnam or the use of depleted uranium in the War of Kosovo and both Gulf Wars is well known. For Virilio the aim of these operations is the "violent installation of an 'artificial climate' that aims at the constitution of an unhealthy, improper place for man just where he used to dwell" [6]

At some point, the final objective of the war is no longer to pacify a territory, but has become war itself. So today we can observe conflicts like Colombia or the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that have lasted over four decades. And areas of the world like Africa, Asia or South America where states are weak and violence is all-pervading. This violence is not casual or produced only by the conditions in the third world, but it has systemic reasons with their origin in the relations between north and south.

This unending crisis of social institutions is not a problem for Capitalism. On the contrary, it is the manifestation of the never ending pressure that the circulation, technology and speed, the essences of Capitalism, inflict in people and societies.

Finally, for Virilio, the violence of this age is not only present in its wars, but its everyday life. And the boundaries between war and peace are becoming increasingly difficult to discern as the strategy of Capitalism consist of: "applying intensively to populations that age-old strategy which consists in sowing divisions everywhere - between peoples, regions, towns, countries, races, religions, sexes, generations and even within families." [7] He calls this *"the Empire of Speed"*.

#### **4. The techno-totalitarian drift as told by Virilio**

As shown formerly, Lacan says that Nazism, Stalinism, and ultra-liberalism policies on technologies share a belief in the never-ending expansion of technology. And that under these three regimens, the technocrat, or specialist, receives greater and greater power.

The specialist's point of view leads to the fragmentation to cities, territories and bodies that are no longer treated as something unified or complete. Against the dictatorship of specialists, Virilio calls out for a culture of resistance that would increase the general awareness about technology and would permit it to be democratically controlled: "we must engage in resistance first of all by developing the idea of a technological culture. However at the present time, this idea is grossly underdeveloped. For example, we have an artistic and a literary culture. Nevertheless, the ideals of technological culture remain underdeveloped and therefore outside of popular culture and the practical ideals of democracy. This is also why society as a whole has no control over technological developments. And this is one of the gravest threats to democracy in the near future. It is, then, imperative to develop a democratic technological culture." [8]

The compulsion to consume and the all-pervading presence of stimuli force our consciences to respond without awareness. This situation erodes our freedom to think and choose.

## 5. A project for our future

Virilio is sometimes criticized as a pessimist and no more than a prophet of doom. But his work has a very positive aspect in that he proposes a direction that humanity could take in order to escape from the present situation.

Virilio ask for a renewed generalism in which technicians no longer dictate the solution but explain and propose the different aspect of possible solutions to the public so that a political debate on the pros and cons of each solution can be held by society. He reminds us of the need to recover the real (not virtualized) aspect of bodies, cities and territories. He insists on the need for a limit to the excesses of the speed, and for a process of slowing down in order to appreciate the contemplative arts and the importance of the human intervention over the importance of the mechanistic aspects.

## 6. Conclusions

The thinking of Paul Virilio casts an interesting light on the crisis of modernity that was, in some ways, predicted by several other authors including Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger or Jacques Lacan. For Virilio the essence of modern capitalism is speed, technology and the circulation of goods and people. These essences find no opposition in social or democratic values, but they act in a vicious circle, expanding into any area of human activity.

Virilio suggest a series of measures to regenerate the relationship between humanity, technology and politics. First of all, a new generalism that put experts at the democratic service of communities. Secondly, a new technological culture that enforces the democratic criticism of technological issues is needed. Finally, efforts must be made to slow things down in order to counteract the dictatorship of speed.

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